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**ABROAD AT HOME** | Anthony Lewis

# The Stupidity Factor

**BOSTON**  
**W**hen an incident aggravates relations between the United States and the Soviet Union, there is a tendency to see it in conspiratorial terms. The ruthless Russians are plotting again. Intractable anti-Soviet elements are maneuvering the U.S. Administration.

But conspiracy is not usually responsible for episodes that heighten superpower tensions. Stupidity is. The U.S. officials who sent Gary Powers on one last U-2 spy plane mission just before the planned Eisenhower-Khrushchev summit meeting in 1960 were fools, not conspirators. Blunder, miscalculation, folly: Those are the words historians use.

The Nicholas Daniloff affair is an outstanding example of the stupidity factor at work. The Reagan Administration has displayed extraordinary ineptitude: not once but again and again. Its blundering has cost Mr. Daniloff dearly, and put the Administration itself in an increasingly embarrassing position.

To say that is not to excuse what the Russians have done to Nick Daniloff. It is to recognize — as I did not at first, in my outrage at Soviet behavior — that an American Government of modest competence would have taken account of likely Soviet reactions. Then the Daniloff affair would never have started, or it would have been more promptly resolved.

The story starts with the arrest of Gennadi Zakharov in a Queens, N.Y., subway station on Aug. 23. Mr. Zakharov was a Soviet employee of the United Nations, evidently a K.G.B. agent. For three years he had paid a young Guyanese man in New York to get him computer information. The

## U.S. blunders marked the Daniloff case

Guyanese was actually acting under orders for the F.B.I.

Through those three years Mr. Zakharov got no classified information. Then, last month, the F.B.I. gave the Guyanese three documents bearing low classifications. He handed them in an envelope to Mr. Zakharov in the subway station, and the arrest followed.

The timing and manner of the Zakharov arrest was bound to look suspicious to Soviet officials. Why feed the first classified material to him, after all those years of playing him on the line, just as the superpowers were working toward a summit meeting?

What happened after the arrest was guaranteed to make the Zakharov case look provocative to the Soviet Union. U.S. officials laid on the publicity, no doubt wanting to show a success in spy prevention after the disasters of recent years. Then Washington did not follow the established practice of allowing Mr. Zakharov to be released in custody of the Soviet Ambassador.

Anyone with the least knowledge of the Soviet Union would have anticipated retaliation in crudely similar terms. That is what the Soviet tactic almost always is: tit for tat. The target for this predictable reaction turned out to be an innocent journalist.

The mystery is how the Reagan Ad-

ministration could have failed to foresee retaliation for its handling of the Zakharov case. Or perhaps one should wonder whether anyone was in charge at all. There is no sign that in this divided, muddled Administration anyone concerned with Soviet-American relations at a high level thought about the consequences before Mr. Zakharov was arrested.

Once Mr. Daniloff was set up, experts saw one likely way out. That was to follow a 1978 precedent in Soviet-American arrangements. Mr. Daniloff would be unconditionally released, then later Mr. Zakharov exchanged for the release of some Soviet dissidents.

But the Reagan Administration dithered, speaking in different tongues, allowing the crisis to build. As time passed voices of right-wing ideology and ambition — men such as Henry Kissinger and Jack Kemp — began denouncing any idea of a deal to free Nick Daniloff. Now it is much harder, politically, for the Administration to dig its way out of the problem.

There is an ultimate irony in the tale. Ronald Reagan, with the responsibility of office upon him, sees that there are reasons to do business with the Soviet Union. We have some areas of mutual interest. One is arms control, and it looks as though the superpowers are close enough to agreement on some arms issues to make a productive summit meeting possible.

Before he entered the White House, though, for 20 years, Mr. Reagan tried to make it hard for American Presidents to do any business with the Soviet Union. He and his people, in the right-wing backlash fostered by their ineptitude, are getting a taste of their own old medicine. □